LAPTOP REVIEWS:

Apple

Michael Tedeschi
Special to The Washington Post

Apple's hardware tends toward the cutting edge of industrial-design chic, with sleek, clean lines that make a Mac look as if it were carved out of a solid block of metal. Sometimes that style costs extra, sometimes it doesn't.

Apple's laptops exhibit that trend nicely. Most of them, especially its larger PowerBooks, sell at a premium over similarly equipped Windows portables, and if you need DVD-burning capability, a PC Card slot or a larger screen in a Mac laptop, you'll have to pay that extra price. If, on the other hand, you just need an everyday machine that won't weigh heavily on your shoulder, the entry-level iBook G4, at $999, stands out as a great deal. Even with the power adapter, you'll be hauling around only 5.3 pounds of computer. It lasted for 3 1/4 hours of DVD playback and ran for just under 6 1/2 hours with all its power-saving options activated.

The iBook's sleek, white case houses a sharp, clear 12-inch screen, easier to read than many larger displays. Its keyboard feels right, and the expansion ports line up in a row on the left side. The only quirk was the slot-loading CD/DVD drive; ejecting a disc can be tricky if the laptop isn't flat.

The iBook now includes 512 megabytes of memory, not the paltry 256 MB once standard. This update also throws in Bluetooth wireless to link such peripherals as cell phones, which isn't an option on most laptops. More useful to many is an enhanced touchpad that lets you scroll through large documents and Web pages by dragging two fingers across it. The iBook also includes a sensor that shuts the hard drive down if the system senses sudden movement.

Apple's sleek, secure Mac OS X can take some practice for Windows users, who may think its uncluttered menus look a little barren. But features such as Spotlight searching and Dashboard widgets obviate the need for the add-ons and add to the refined feeling.

Apple's iLife set of multimedia programs, suitable for both novices and experienced digital auteurs, is far better than the junk on most Windows machines. The rest of Apple's software bundle, however, is merely serviceable: Quicken 2005 and Apple's aging AppleWorks productivity suite.

Apple's technical support is knowledgeable and patient — but you must be patient, too. Set aside 12 to 15 minutes to wait for a representative, and your questions should be accurately and politely answered.

4.9 pounds (5.3 pounds with power adapter), 12-inch LCD (1,024 by 768 pixels), 1.33 GHz PowerPC G4, 512 MB memory, 32 MB graphics memory, 37.3 GB hard drive, CD-RW/DVD-ROM drive, Ethernet, WiFi, modem, FireWire port, two USB 2.0 ports, Bluetooth.

One-year warranty. 90 days of 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. phone tech support; $49 per-issue fee afterward.

Dell

Kevin Savetz
Special to The Washington Post

Dell, aiming to provide a laptop for everyone, offers seven lines, each of which emphasizes a particular quality — compact size, low price, multimedia, computer games and so on. The Inspiron 700m we tested lands in the middle of Dell's price range — it sold for as low as $899 last week, and our upgraded test unit came in at $1,479. Like most Dell models, it can be a great choice if customized wisely (we'd buy it over Dell's other lighter-weight models); going with a standard configuration; however, may limit its appeal.

The best upgrade on our 700m was a higher-capacity battery, which costs $99 more than the standard unit. It enabled the 700m to run for more than 31/2 hours playing a DVD; when set for maximum battery life, with WiFi shut off, it lasted just shy of six hours.

This long-life battery also added just under half a pound to the 700m's weight, pushing it past 4.6 pounds (a too-hefty power adapter adds almost another pound). The 700m's keyboard is small, at 10 inches across, but comfortable. Its widescreen LCD is also on the compact side but is clear and bright.

Software options include Windows XP Home or Professional, Microsoft Works, Corel WordPerfect and Microsoft Office. Dell also sells three Internet-security suites at prices up to $99 — but some configurations are offered without any security software.

Our test system included a 15-month subscription to Norton Internet Security 2005, plus a basic photo-album program and a starter version of Intuit's QuickBooks business-accounting program — not Intuit's consumer-focused Quicken.

Dell has traditionally bundled a CD of Windows, but it now stashes a backup copy of Windows on a hidden hard-drive partition and charges $10 extra for a Windows disc. Although the pre-installed version of Windows XP included Service Pack 2, our CD copy lacked that vital update.

Dell's standard warranty lasts only 90 days, but it will gladly sell you upgrade options such as a $29, one-year warranty or a four-year, all-encompassing care package for $496. The overseas reps we reached were fairly well-informed and very patient, although not always easy to hear. Dell's online support is excellent, with plenty of informative self-help resources.

4.6 pounds (5.5 pounds with power adapter), 12.1-inch widescreen LCD (1,280 by 800 pixels), 1.6 GHz Intel Pentium M, 512 MB memory (up to 64 MB shared for graphics use), 75.8 GB hard drive, CD-RW/DVD+/-RW drive, SD Card slot, Ethernet, WiFi, modem, PC Card slot, FireWire port, two USB 2.0 ports.

90-day warranty. 90 days of 24-hour, toll-free phone tech support; $39 per-call fee afterward.

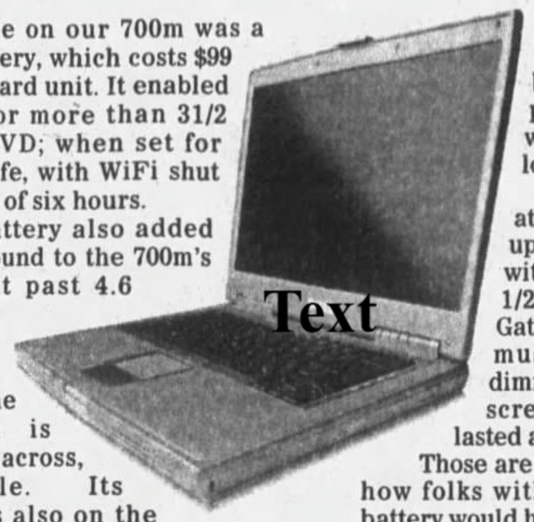
Gateway

Rebecca Rohan
Special to The Washington Post

Gateway's M250 models — the lightest of this company's seven lines of laptops — can be had for much less than most machines in its weight class. The low-end M250S goes for just $699. But the model Gateway sent for review, the now-discontinued M250XL, cost $1,494 after a healthy round of upgrades.

That should be a lesson in self-control when customizing a computer. But Gateway doesn't help matters with its pushy salesmanship: Its Web site adds a $50 carrying case and a $160, three-year service plan to the bill before you even start your order.

All M250 models start with the same basic ingredients: widescreen 14-inch displays, CD-RW/DVD-ROM combo drives and smallish, 40-gigabyte hard drives. The tested configuration — while no longer sold as the M250XL, an M250X can be custom-ordered with the same specifications — included a faster Pentium M processor, an 80 GB hard drive, a double-layer DVD burner drive (which had repeated problems playing back movies without skipping) and a larger, longer-life battery.



Of those updates, the faster chip, at $340, made the least sense. But the upgraded battery earned its $45 cost with an outstanding performance — 3 1/2 hours of DVD playback. This Gateway ran for 4 hours 53 minutes of music playback with the screen dimmed halfway; with WiFi off and the screen dimmed as low as visible, it lasted a minute less than seven hours.

Those are all terrific figures. But we wonder how folks with the smaller, lighter standard battery would have fared.

We liked the M250's generously sized touchpad, which includes a scroll strip at its right edge that serves the same function as the scroll wheel in most mice.

Gateway did not overburden this machine's hard drive with programs, sticking to basics such as Microsoft Works 8, three months of Norton Internet Security and McAfee AntiSpyware, and a handful of maintenance and CD/DVD tools.

Gateway stores a backup copy of Windows XP on a hidden partition on the hard drive, then throws in some blank CDs and directions on how to create your own recovery discs. After Norton Internet Security bombed out on us, we tried to follow those instructions to reinstall the software. But Gateway's CD-burning software kicked out "not blank" messages and never yielded a fresh CD of the Norton software.

Gateway did provide clear printed documentation and staffed its tech-support line — a toll call — with courteous, prepared representatives who answered our calls quickly and accurately.

5.4 pounds (6 pounds with power adapter), 14-inch widescreen LCD (1,280 by 768 pixels), 2 GHz Intel Pentium M, 512 MB memory (up to 128 MB shared for graphics use), 76.2 GB hard drive, CD-RW/DVD+/-RW drive, Memory Stick/SD Card slot, Ethernet, WiFi, modem, PC Card slot, FireWire port, three USB 2.0 ports.

One-year warranty. One year of 24-hour phone tech support; $2.95 per-minute fee afterward.

Hewlett-Packard

John Breeden II
Special to The Washington Post

Shopping for a laptop from Hewlett-Packard can take a while. Not only can you choose from a spread of HP Pavilion laptops that, weighing from 5 to 9 pounds, cover every segment of the market besides the ultralight category, you can then repeat the exercise with an equally varied array of HP's Compaq Presario models that are often indistinguishable from their Pavilion siblings. Once you've picked out a model, a further round of decisions awaits if you indulge in the company's custom-build options.

The Pavilion dv1000 series, which includes the lightest models in the Pavilion lineup, stands out in a few ways, some good and one bad. The tested model was $1,149, with a $50 mail-in rebate available.

It's certainly one of the easier machines to spot in the dark: All of its important control buttons glow blue, making it easier to find the power, play, pause and volume switches or to turn the WiFi receiver on and off.

Its 14-inch widescreen display's glossy surface helps movies pop off the screen. And with two headphone jacks, a couple can easily share an in-flight flick. You can boot this machine into a nifty, simple QuickPlay system to watch DVDs and listen to music without having to wait for Windows to start.

Unfortunately, HP's innovation didn't extend to the dv1000's power supply. It conked out after 1 hour 40 minutes of movie playback and 2 hours 5 minutes of music playback (with the screen at half brightness), a pathetic performance. Only when we employed every available power-saving option, short of blanking the screen, did the machine perform up to par, lasting 6 3/4 hours in that best-case scenario.

HP sells a higher-capacity, 12-cell battery for just $25 extra (although it adds weight and size to the laptop), but why is its standard battery such a joke?

HP's standard software bundle is unremarkable, except for its inclusion of Apple's iTunes for music playback. Windows XP Home was up to date on the hard drive, with a CD included if you need to reinstall it.

The test laptop came with 60 days of antivirus protection from Symantec's Norton AntiVirus, but no spyware blocking is included — and some configurations are sold without any security software.

Five calls to tech support were rather painless, with hold times of no longer than five minutes — twice, we reached a human almost immediately — and accurate advice was offered. A one-year warranty is standard; paying another $99 will add accidental-damage coverage.

5.3 pounds (5.7 pounds with power adapter), 14-inch widescreen LCD (1,280 by 768 pixels), 1.7 GHz Pentium M processor, 512 MB memory (up to 128 MB shared for graphics use), 56.7 GB hard drive, CD-RW/DVD+/-RW drive, Memory Stick/SmartMedia/SD Card/xD-Picture Card slot, Ethernet, WiFi, modem, PC Card slot, FireWire port, three USB 2.0 ports.

One-year warranty, one year of 24-hour, toll-free phone tech support; $40 per-issue fee afterward.

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